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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000080

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TAGS: [BG](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH ARMY CHIEF REMAINS COMMITTED TO  
ELECTIONS, DENIES POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS, BUT APPEARS WEARY  
AND WARY WITH ELEVEN MONTHS TO GO FOR CARETAKER GOVERNMENT

REF: DHAKA 46

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S) Summary: One year after prompting the President to declare a State of Emergency and install a new Caretaker Government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed has as many questions as answers regarding the prospects for the coming 11 months. Moeen and his closest advisors understand the need for a consensus between the Army, the CTG, and the political parties regarding the road ahead, and are trying to put in place a process that will result in agreement on an exit strategy.<sup>8</sup> On top of the day to day struggles to keep the government functioning, progress on the political roadmap is proving to be harder than Moeen and his cohort expected, and appears to be taking a toll on the Army Chief. External crises such as high food prices, unrest in the garment industry, and lingering dissatisfaction at Dhaka University are serving as distractions and are further complicating the CTG's ability to implement the electoral roadmap. Bangladesh's military is proud of the role it is playing in voter registration and in responding to natural disasters, but the soldiers, airmen, and sailors are tired and their leadership recognizes the need to maintain morale. Key questions for the coming months will be Moeen's ability to retain the support of his officers and men, and to maintain a modus vivendi with the Chief Adviser. End Summary.

Guess Who,s Coming to Dinner

12. (S) CDA a.i. and ADCM were invited to a private dinner January 14 by Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed. Throughout the evening, Moeen appeared both weary because of recent events and wary of the motives of political parties. He insisted that elections would be held before December 31, 2008 and reaffirmed previous statements that he would not declare martial law as long as he is alive.<sup>8</sup> Moeen credibly dismissed speculation that he sought to replace President Iajuddin. When questioned, however, Moeen admitted that there was discussion within the Army regarding a one-year extension of his tenure as Army Chief. (Comment: We view this extension as likely.) On January 17, Dhaka daily papers led with Moeen's comments to a television talk show scheduled to air later in the day, in which he reaffirmed that the army had absolutely "no intention" of seeking political power and in which he categorically denied that he seeks the Presidency.

## Support to CTG Taking its Toll

13. (S) Moeen highlighted the Army's contributions to voter registration and disaster relief. He admitted that this extra burden was taking its toll, and said that he had to repeatedly reassure his officers and men that their sacrifices were justified. (During a dinner in honor of Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Willard January 16, Bangladesh's Chief of Naval Operations echoed Moeen's comments, noting that support to the civilian government was also taxing the Navy). Despite the added workload, Moeen told us the Army had not reduced the number of soldiers participating in PKOs, using this to motivate those left behind. Moeen confided that he has regular &pep talks8 with his officers and men. On January 16, Moeen told us he plans to send his troops back to the cantonments after registration ends in June, to allow them to recover prior to taking on election duties in the fall.

## What To Do About the Parties?

14. (S) Moeen was openly critical of the political parties for failing to take advantage of the past year to initiate internal reforms. He was adamant that &business as usual8 would not return. Moeen said that the Army and CTG were taking the necessary steps to prepare for elections, including registering voters. He said that the political dialogue would take place beginning in February, and be conducted by an individual (or individuals) working on behalf of the CTG. He emphasized that the Army would not be a party to the dialogue. He also said that the ban on politics would be further relaxed in the coming weeks.

DHAKA 00000080 002 OF 003

Moeen predicted that local elections would take place after April, to partially satisfy popular desire to cast ballots. He said that nobody would be allowed to stand in the way of elections.

15. (S) Directorate General Forces Intelligence Counter Terrorism Head Brigadier A.T.M. Amin gave the CDA a.i. additional insight into the Army's political strategy when they met on January 10. Amin, who set up the CDA a.i.'s dinner with Moeen, said that the Army had been talking with district level political officials, and that a national level dialogue would take place beginning in February. His suggestion was that a group of eminent persons could conduct the dialogue, naming former State Minister Abul Hassan Chowdhury and academic Dr. Mizanur Rahman Shelley as examples of those who could make up such a group. Amin said there were no plans to send the two former Prime Ministers abroad at this time. He said that there had been negotiations with the two, but these had ended in August. Amin predicted that while there might be future clemency given to the two former PMs, the cases against them would go ahead.

16. (S) In both the meetings with Moeen and Amin, CDA a.i. stressed the absolute priority of holding elections by the end of 2008 and handing over power to an elected government. She cautioned that the CTG should avoid anything that could possibly delay elections. In particular, when discussing institutional/constitutional reforms ahead of elections, the CTG should be careful not to take on more than it can handle. We stressed the need for a consensus regarding reforms and a shared vision for the country after elections.

## Jumping from Crisis to Crisis

17. (S) Moeen expressed concerns about the &day to day8 crises that are continuing to distract the CTG and its supporters, including most recently violence in garment factories and the renewed protests at the university. When we met for dinner, Moeen said that the latter issue had consumed the day for him, and he expressed frustration that

the protests were continuing despite assurances that the arrested teachers and students would be released. He said that this situation would hopefully be resolved in the next few days. For the first time, Moeen was very critical of the civil service and their lack of support for the CTG.

#### Possible Strains in Relationship with Chief Adviser

¶18. (S) During the course of their conversation, the CDA a.i. mentioned that the Chief Adviser would be traveling to the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos this month. Moeen said he was unaware of this, and doubted the trip was taking place this month, saying he would certainly have known about it. In fact, the Chief Adviser is going to Davos January 23 ) 27, and had not informed General Moeen. We have heard from others that the relationship between the Army Chief and Chief Adviser has become strained, including over the issue of the resignations of four advisers earlier this month. While some had hoped that their joint trip to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj would have given Moeen and Fakhruddin an opportunity to forge a closer relationship, there are no indications that this was achieved.

#### Thanks to International Community for its Support

¶19. (S) Moeen was very appreciative of the support shown by the USG, noting that if we and others in the international community had not been supportive, this would have opened another front for the CTG. Moeen reiterated this in his meeting with Admiral Willard January 16, and in our separate meeting today. He reiterated his appreciation for the support during Operation Sea Angel II, highlighting the benefits for interoperability of this cooperation. Admiral Willard also discussed expanded engagement when they met.

#### Comment

¶10. (S) Unlike in earlier meetings, Moeen displayed little passion in his most recent discussions with the CDA a.i, except when discussing the collaboration between our two

DHAKA 00000080 003 OF 003

militaries during Operation Sea Angel II. Moeen stated in several different ways that elections would take place on schedule, but did not present a clear formula for how to overcome the resistance of the parties to reform. It is possible the events of the past year, and perhaps in particular the last weeks (including medical treatment in Saudi Arabia), have taken their toll on the Army Chief. We have heard from other sources that Chief Adviser Fakhruddin is also weary of criticism, and that relations between the Chief Adviser and Army Chief were strained over the decision to replace four of the Advisers. It may be that at the one year mark, the Army Chief and others who supported the 1/11 changes are sobered by how hard it has been to accomplish the task they set out for themselves. They understand the need to leave on a high note, in order to keep their personal and institutional reputations intact, but are frustrated by their inability to force others (including the parties and the bureaucrats) to do their part. End Comment  
Pasi